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LeBrun: Does state deserve water crisis report's marks?

By Fred LeBrun

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A report card issued a year after the federal Environmental Protection Agency told Hoosick Falls residents not to drink the water because of industrial chemical contamination is deeply unflattering to Gov. Andrew Cuomo and his state Health Department's efforts to address the crisis.

Are the failing and incomplete grades deserved?

Cuomo and his Health Department were graded by still-angry residents and advocates on four key issues: establishing advisory health levels of the contaminant, perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA), that reflect the latest public health science (fail); creating bio and medical monitoring for members of the affected community (incomplete); establishing a new primary water source that is contaminant-free (incomplete); and overall state government accountability and transparency observed over the past year (fail).

The governor himself took a lambasting from residents for his role.

"The fears are as raw today as they were one year ago, and the state's lumbering response continues to place the people I love in danger. New York has failed us, so our report card is our chance to draw attention to their actions and to fail them," said Michelle O'Leary.

The citizenry of Hoosick Falls has to be yet again commended for raising an alarm. While this report card is necessarily a look backward over familiar ground, it's also a solid indicator of what we can currently expect related to future water issues statewide. And you can bet the farm, there will be future issues. The way forward is not encouraging.

Hoosick falls residents continue to take the deeply distressing situation they live and breathe every day, even after media and governmental attention has drifted elsewhere, right to the doorstep of those they feel screwed it up in the first place. To the corridors of the state Capitol, and why not?

After all, it was the state Health Department that told residents there were no health consequences to PFOA levels in the Hoosick Falls drinking water, even as the feds were saying just the opposite. That grave disparity is undeniable.

Yet the Health Department, and the governor, have conspicuously refused to accept responsibility — call it accountability — for misinforming residents, or offered any meaningful form of apology. The opposite; they've dragged their heels in a number of areas with a sort of passive resistance to whatever stances or claims have been made by common sense, by the EPA and by developing science on resolving the problem.

Cuomo's deep dislike for the EPA involvement in his state seems to have gotten in the way of a collegial resolution. Instead it's become a political competition.

"What is the purpose of the Department of Health if not to at least warn residents when their health may be at risk?" said resident Jennifer Plouffe at the report card's unveiling. "When New York could have told us levels were dangerous, they failed to do so. When residents needed clear information, the state failed to provide it. When we needed the results of our blood tests, the state failed to move quickly. When we needed accountability, state legislators reneged. When we demanded answers from the polluters responsible, the state went silent. There is a pattern here."

Which brings us to the meat of the report card.

PFOA advisory levels: The state health department's Dr. Howard Zucker at legislative hearings made much of what he called confusing numbers from the EPA, after the federal agency dropped health advisory numbers to 70 parts per trillion. Cuomo has indicated the EPA's number is sufficient for long-term exposure, although other states like Vermont and New Jersey have dropped theirs lower, a position warranted by emerging science. Oddly enough, I am told our Health Department has yet to actually lower the state standard from the archaic 50,000 parts per trillion, the generic number associated with so-called unregulated contaminants, even though health officials testified they would.

In any case, if New York is to be an environmentally progressive and proactive state as we go into the uncertainty of the EPA's future and TrumpWorld, setting more stringent benchmarks for water quality even for unregulated contaminants regardless of federal "guidance" is a no-brainer.

Bio and medical monitoring: Blood testing has been ongoing in Hoosick Falls and Petersburg. But what the Health Department has been short on providing is information to those receiving test results on what they mean. It's been suggested that a letter from the Health Department alerting residents and their physicians what cancers and other conditions need to be watched for is also in order. The tricky part is getting insurance carriers to pay for the monitoring sought by residents. That would require the governor to use his bully pulpit to push for it, but neither he nor his Health Department seem motivated in that direction.

Finding new water sources: The governor's assertion that his administration has done all it could to resolve the Hoosick Falls water crisis is based on creating a temporary and, soon, a permanent carbon filtration system, for private wells and the existing municipal supply. What he claims has merit, to a point. However, these filtration systems are not a cost-effective long-term solution. An alternative, contaminant-free water source — such as Troy's Tomhannock reservoir — is the only way to go, and so far we're not hearing much about that. Which goes back to the transparency issue.

So does Cuomo deserve his failing grade?

Yes, mostly for failing to switch sides and come clean when he realized he was on the wrong side of a politically indefensible position. His health department? Absolutely and in spades. An arrogant lot, but you already knew that.

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State to start design of Bennington municipal water line extension

by Bennington Banner

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VT Digger.com

Editor's note: This article by Edward Damon of the Bennington Banner was first published Friday, Nov. 25, 2016.

BENNINGTON — Officials hope to break ground on a project to extend municipal water lines to properties with wells contaminated by a potentially harmful chemical sometime in 2017.

The state has signed a contract with two firms to begin the first phase of final design work around Bennington and North Bennington, estimated to cost about half a million dollars, Gov. Peter Shumlin announced this week.

The state already committed to pay for final design services, which were estimated to cost \$2 million, in the absence of an agreement with Saint-Gobain Corp. The Department of Environmental Conservation says the French multinational company is potentially responsible for contamination from the manmade chemical PFOA. Officials have said they will recover costs from Saint-Gobain and that talks between the company and state are ongoing.

“Our goal is to break ground for construction in 2017,” DEC Commissioner Alyssa

Schuren said in prepared remarks. "We have an aggressive schedule and we aim to meet it."

PFOA, or perfluorooctanoic acid, was used in industry for decades to manufacture the non-stick coating Teflon. PFOA has been linked to health problems such as kidney and testicular cancers, thyroid diseases and high cholesterol. It was found in some private wells serving homes and businesses in Bennington and North Bennington, but not the municipalities' public water systems. The suspected source is the former Chem-Fab factory in North Bennington, which Saint-Gobain operated for two years before closing it in 2002.

The state tested private drinking water wells in North Bennington and Bennington for PFOA and related chemicals, after concerns over past industrial activities. Of 544 wells, 270 were found to have levels at or above 20 parts per trillion, the state's health advisory limit. Point-of-entry filtration systems were installed on 260 private wells. The state also paid to extend municipal lines to 10 properties on and near Northside Drive.

Saint-Gobain agreed to pay for the filters' installation, maintenance and testing. But residents and officials have been vocal about the need to expand public water systems to affected homes and businesses, calling it a more preferable solution. It could cost upwards of \$30 million to connect impacted homes in the village and town to the respective municipal water systems, according to two engineering reports released this summer.

"While negotiations continue, we are not waiting to start the process of getting an acceptable long-term drinking water solution for impacted residents in Bennington County," Shumlin said in a news release this week. "The people of Bennington County who have been affected by this crisis have shown incredible patience and perseverance. Until a long-term solution is in place, we will continue to be there every step of the
